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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to assess the emphasis that elementary school teachers place on teaching vocabulary. The survey, distributed to 359 teachers in 7 school districts around the country, was completed by 228 teachers of grades one through five. Questions were directed at vocabulary instruction within the reading program as well as within the total curriculum. An important focus of the survey was to determine whether classroom teachers differentiate vocabulary instruction based on the ability levels of their reading groups. The results indicated that the teachers did place a high priority on vocabulary instruction, both prior to having the student read a basal passage and in content area instruction. Direct vocabulary instruction as a separate instructional area, however, was not a high priority. Of the teachers surveyed, 52% reported that they do not allocate any time specifically to vocabulary instruction as a separate subject. The teachers appeared to take into account the ability level of the reading groups when planning vocabulary instruction for their reading program. Contrary to other research findings, low ability readers were reported as receiving as much (or more) vocabulary instruction prior to reading a passage as average or above average readers. (Author/HTH)

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Program Report 84-3

A FIELD ASSESSMENT OF VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by

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ABSTRACT

In Winter 1984, a survey was distributed to 359 elementary school teachers of grades one through five from seven school districts around the country. The purpose of the survey was to provide a current field assessment of the emphasis that elementary school teachers place on teaching vocabulary. Questions were directed at vocabulary instruction within the reading program as well as within the total curriculum. An important focus of the survey was to determine whether classroom teachers differentiate vocabulary instruction based on the ability levels of their reading groups.

Results of the survey indicated that teachers do place a high priority on vocabulary instruction both prior to having students reading a basal passage and in content area instruction. Direct vocabulary instruction as a separate instructional area, however, did not receive a high priority. Of the teachers surveyed, 52% reported that they do not allocate any time specifically to vocabulary instruction as a separate subject. Teachers appear to take into account the ability level of the reading groups when planning vocabulary instruction for their reading program. Contrary to some research findings, low ability readers are reported to be receiving as much (or more) vocabulary instruction prior to reading a passage as average or above average readers.

I. INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a resurgence of interest in vocabulary instruction. In fact, some have referred to it as the "second coming of words." We have been curious about the impact of recent vocabulary research on actual classroom practice in reading development. For this reason, we decided to try to find out if, indeed, vocabulary instruction is as "alive and well" as some of the recent literature might suggest.

In Winter 1984, a 17-question survey was sent to 359 elementary school teachers of grades one through five from seven school districts around the country. The purpose of the survey was to gather data which would provide a current field assessment of the emphasis that elementary school teachers place on teaching vocabulary. Questions were directed at vocabulary instruction within the reading program as well as within the total curriculum. Of particular interest was whether classroom teachers differentiate vocabulary instruction based on the ability levels of their reading groups.

IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN READING

It is generally agreed that word knowledge is an integral component of comprehension both in basal reading and content area instruction. Early researchers in reading comprehension and in verbal intelligence formally documented the significant role that vocabulary knowledge plays in both areas (Albright, 1927; Hilliard, 1924; Pressey & Pressey, 1921). More recent research using factor analysis (Davis, 1944, 1968, 1972; Spearitt, 1972), readability (Chall, 1958; Klare, 1974-75), and test construction (Farr, 1969) has consistently found strong correlations between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

Knowledge of word meanings has been selected by authorities as one of the most critical skills related to success in reading (Barrett & Graves, 1981; Becker, 1977; Davis, 1972; Hunt, 1957; Johnson, Toms-Bronowski, & Buss, 1983; Spearitt, 1972), with teacher educators strongly advocating vocabulary instruction as part of basal series pre-reading activities. Spache and Spache (1977) suggested that the first fundamental step to a basal reading lesson should be the introduction of new vocabulary. Dolores Durkin (1974), in her book Teaching Them to Read, stated, "If students are expected to read a basal selection that includes new words, they must be given the chance to learn any that they cannot decode themselves." Smith and Johnson concur and, in their book Teaching Children to Read (1980), cautioned teachers to be sure to introduce vocabulary that is likely to be misinterpreted or unfamiliar to poor readers.

Contrary to the strong recommendations from teacher educators to incorporate vocabulary instruction into reading lessons, a lack of

vocabulary instruction in basal reading lessons was noted by Roser and Juel (1981). In their observations of approximately 1200 minutes of reading instruction, they found that the total amount of time spent on instruction in word meanings was 65 minutes with the mean vocabulary instructional time being only 1.67 minutes per lesson. (The range of times was from 0 to 12 minutes.)

O'Rourke, in his study Toward a Science of Vocabulary Development (1974), asserted that vocabulary instruction has typically been viewed in a narrow context and taught in an unstructured, incidental, or even accidental manner. He found that, while teachers are concerned with the mechanics of vocabulary instruction, they do not appear to know why they use a specific teaching technique for helping students learn to use vocabulary meaningfully. O'Rourke explained that this is particularly true for instruction in vocabulary development that is part of a reading lesson from a basal series. Stauffer (1971) pointed out that teachers generally rely on a very limited repertoire of vocabulary activities which are presented in the basal manual when they could be creating their own. Stauffer also suggested that teachers should be using other activities that might be more beneficial for some students or more appropriate for certain types of reading.

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION IN BASAL READING PROGRAMS

Prior to finalizing the teacher survey, a questionnaire was sent to the senior reading editors of ten widely used basal reading series to learn more about vocabulary instruction in those series. Eight of the ten responded. In general, the editors of basal reading series seemed to give vocabulary instruction equal priority with other major skill strands, linking vocabulary knowledge closely to reading comprehension. All eight editors indicated that their series did identify words for vocabulary instruction. In general, the words highlighted for instruction were either obtained from various high frequency word lists or were "new" in the series and assumed to be unfamiliar to students.

Six of the eight series recommended that vocabulary be taught prior to reading a selection, with two series limiting this practice to primary grades. Of these two series, one recommended that the words be introduced in the intermediate grades but not be "fully" taught, while the other suggested instead that students use the strategies that were taught in the primary grades to figure out unfamiliar words they encounter in the selections.

While it is apparent from this survey that publishers share the belief of teacher educators that vocabulary instruction be an integral part of pre-reading activities, it cannot be assumed that teachers follow the recommendations of the series and implement the activities that are suggested in the basal manuals. In 1983, Durkin conducted a classroom observational study of 16 teachers to determine how basal manuals affect teacher behavior during reading instruction. One of the specific research questions addressed in Durkin's study was whether any patterns could be found regarding which activities teachers used, skipped, or altered. Durkin found that the basal manuals had a minor

influence on the pre-reading activities and a major influence on post-reading activities. Durkin summarized that "little or no time went to new vocabulary, background information, or pre-reading questions, whereas considerable attention went to comprehension assessment questions and written practice assignments" (1983, p. 26).

EFFECTS OF INSTRUCTIONAL ABILITY GROUPS ON READING ACTIVITIES

The grouping of students for reading instruction is another practice that could affect the type of instructional activities that teachers use to teach reading and vocabulary. Hiebert (1983) stated that "most American elementary teachers still appear to conduct much of their reading instruction in ability groups. These groups appear to be relatively permanent entities with teachers making few, if any, changes in group membership after the first month of school" (p.232).

In our survey, information was obtained about whether students were grouped for reading instruction. Our particular concern is what, if any, relationship exists between ability level of the group and the type of instructional activities teachers select to present to that group.

According to Winn and Wilson (1983), placement in an ability group has an impact on at least three instructional variables: (1) the student-teacher interaction, (2) the type and level of instruction, and (3) the availability of educational resources. A major focus of our present survey was to address the second variable, the level of instruction, with an emphasis on the pre-reading vocabulary instruction that is afforded students at different reading ability levels.

Hiebert (1983) reported that research on the effects of time-related variables on children's learning indicates that the amount of time teachers allocate to teacher-directed reading groups relates positively to children's reading achievement. Hiebert suggested that how teachers allocate teaching time between reading groups of different reading abilities as well as how they allocate time to different tasks within a given ability group affect reading achievement. Along with determining the pre-reading activities teachers use with their different ability groups, our survey also considered the amount of time teachers devote to these pre-reading activities.

Allington (1983) found that poor readers do receive instruction different from that provided good readers. Good readers are more likely to receive lessons that emphasize meaning, while lessons presented to poor readers more often emphasize words, sounds, and letters. Allington asserted that "good and poor readers differ in their reading ability as much because of differences in instruction as variations in individual learning styles or aptitudes" (p. 548).

Rosenbaum (1980) noted that, while it is typically assumed that teachers do differentiate activities, this assumption has seldom been documented or the effects of differentiation examined.

Alpert (1975) conducted a study with 15 high and 15 low reading groups from eleven second-grade classrooms to investigate this issue. Alpert found differences in teaching methods and materials consistent with differences in group needs. She concluded that teachers were attempting to meet the needs of high and low ability students through the adaptation of methods and materials.

An important focus of this survey was to further investigate whether teachers do actually differentiate pre-reading and vocabulary instruction based on the ability level of the reading group. This research effort obviously does not address the effects of any differentiation noted. The data collected, however, will serve to document whether such differentiation of instruction between ability groups does occur in the area of pre-reading instruction.

II. SURVEY RESULTS

The survey was distributed in Winter 1984 to 359 elementary school teachers of grades 1-5 from seven school districts around the country. A list of the states represented in the survey is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Survey Response Summary

State	Surveys sent	Surveys returned	Surveys Used	
			Number	Percent
California	44	26	24	54.55
Colorado	37	27	22	59.46
Florida	60	62	52	86.67
Iowa	42	27	26	61.90
Missouri	64	40	31	48.44
New York	44	16	14	31.82
Texas	68	63	59	86.76
TOTAL	359	261	228	63.51

The rate of return on the surveys was high, with 72.7 percent (261 surveys) being returned. In the final data analysis, 228 surveys were used, 63.51 percent of those orininally distributed. A survey was not used in the data analysis if the response was incomplete or if the teacher was not in the target sample (i.e., was not a classroom teacher, did not teach reading, did not teach grades 1-5).

TEACHER DATA SUMMARY

Of the 228 first- through fifth-grade teachers whose surveys were used in the data analysis, there were approximately 20 percent of the teachers in each grade, with percentages decreasing from 22.8 for first-grade teachers to 15.35 for fifth-grade teachers (see Table 2).

Table 2

Teacher Data Summary

Grade Level	Number of Teachers	Percent at each Grade Level	Mean Number of Years Teaching[a]
First	52	22.80	12.23
Second	50	21.92	13.06
Third	50	21.92	13.02
Fourth	41	17.98	12.90
Fifth	35	15.35	13.00
Total	228	99.97[b]	12.83
Primary	102	44.11	12.64
Intermediate	126	55.89	12.98

[a]Range of teacher experience: Less than one year (2 teachers) to over 40 years (1 teacher)

[b]Does not sum to 100% due to rounding

For some analyses, teachers were combined across grades to form a primary group and an intermediate group as it was felt that the skills emphasized in the upper and lower grades are different. The first- and second-grade teachers formed the primary group and the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers formed the intermediate group. (Third grade was included in the intermediate group rather than the primary group as the skill of third-grade students appears to more closely resemble the skills employed by fourth- and fifth-grade students than the "learning-to-read" skills of first- and second-grade students.) The primary teachers comprised slightly less than half of the teachers used in the data analysis.

The number of years of teaching experience was consistent for teachers across all five grades, with the overall mean number of years at 12.83. The range of years of teaching experience for teachers was from less than one year to over 40 years.

ORGANIZATION FOR READING INSTRUCTION

When asked to describe their organization for reading instruction, just over half of the teachers indicated that they teach reading to only the students in their classrooms, with the reamining teachers reporting

that they teach reading to students who come from at least one other classroom (cross group). As indicated in Table 3, there is a fairly

Table 3

Organization for Reading Instruction

Instructional Group	GRADE 1 (n=52)	2 (n=50)	3 (n=50)	4 (n=41)	5 (n=35)	Overall (n=228)
Own Class[a]	80.77	46.00	52.00	39.02	17.14	50.84
Cross Group[b]	19.23	54.00	48.00	60.98	82.86	49.16

[a]Percentage of teachers who reported that they teach reading to only the students in their classroom.

[b]Percentage of teachers who reported that they teach reading to students who come from at least one other classroom.

consistent trend toward more cross grouping as the grade level of the students increases. Only 19.23 percent of the first-grade teachers reported that they cross group for reading, while 82.86 percent of the fifth-grade teachers indicated that they cross group.

Teachers completing the survey were asked to specify how many reading groups they taught and the reading level of their reading groups (above, at, or below grade level.) The mean number of groups that a first-grade teacher instructs was 3.22 groups as compared to 1.78 groups for the fifth-grade teachers (see Table 4). While there is a tendency

Table 4

Mean Number of Reading Groups per Teacher at Each Grade Level

	Organization for Reading Instruction		
Grade	Own Class	Cross Group	Total
1	3.24	3.13	3.22
2	3.25	2.81	3.00
3	2.64	2.17	2.42
4	2.88	2.20	2.46
5	2.00	1.68	1.78

for teachers who teach reading to children from their own classrooms to form slightly more reading groups than teachers who cross group for instruction, the factor of organization for reading instruction does not seem to have an effect on the number of reading groups a teacher forms. What is clear is that, regardless of organization for reading instruction, teachers of the primary grades form more instructional reading groups than do intermediate grade teachers.

MEAN NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN READING GROUPS

Overall there is a trend for the size of reading groups to increase as the grade level increases, with a pronounced increase in the fifth grade (see Table 5). This was anticipated given the decrease in the number of reading groups a teacher forms as grade level increases, as noted in the Table 4. While none of the first-grade teachers surveyed formed only one reading group for instruction, nearly half (45%) of the fifth-grade teachers who cross group for reading instruction and 20% of those who teach only students from their own class formed only one group for new instruction.

When ability level of the group is considered, the at grade level ability groups in both the primary and intermediate grades had the largest mean group size (see Table 5).

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

There are various activities that teachers engage in to prepare students for reading a selection. Teachers completing the survey were asked to note the frequency of use of several standard pre-reading activities. Of the five activities listed, "introducing vocabulary" was the top ranked activity to prepare students to read a basal selection by all teachers, with 75.62 percent of the primary grade teachers and 85.16 percent of the intermediate grade teachers reporting that they "almost always" introduce new vocabulary before students read a basal selection. For primary teachers, the second ranked pre-reading activity was "providing purpose-setting questions" (51.79 percent), while for intermediate teachers, "supplying background information" was the second most used pre-reading activity (49.73 percent). A list of the activities with the teacher responses is presented in Table 6.

Of specific interest was whether teachers alter their pre-reading instruction based on the ability level of the reading group. When ability level was considered as a factor, "introducing new vocabulary" still remained the most widely used pre-reading activity for all ability groups with the exception of the above grade level group at the primary level (see Table 6). For these above grade level primary students, "providing purpose-setting questions" was the top ranked pre-reading activity (54.44 percent), with "introducing new vocabulary" listed as second (44.12 percent).

In the intermediate grades, the three most frequently used pre-reading activities were the same across all three ability levels.

Table 5

Mean Number of Students in Reading Groups

Ability Level	GRADE 1 (n=153)	2 (n=138)	3 (n=113)	4 (n=96)	5 (n=56)	Primary	Intermediate	Total (n=556)
Above grade level	5.75	8.02	12.05	10.71	13.30	6.95	11.90	9.49
At grade level	9.25	9.34	11.70	14.47	17.05	9.29	13.85	11.28
Below grade level	7.55	8.19	7.96	8.77	15.21	7.84	9.75	8.79
Across ability levels	8.15	8.57	10.04	11.01	15.59	8.33	11.56	9.87

Note: n indicates total number of reading groups at each grade level.

Table 6

Pre-Reading Activities That Teachers Report They "Almost Always" Do to Prepare Students for Reading A Basal Selection

Activity	Percentage Responses by Ability Level: Primary Above Grade	Primary At Grade	Primary Below Grade	Primary Total	Intermediate Above Grade	Intermediate At Grade	Intermediate Below Grade	Intermediate Total
Introduce new vocabulary	44.12[b]	74.39[a]	89.47[a]	75.62[a]	70.27[a]	87.84[a]	90.14[a]	85.16[a]
Provide purpose-setting questions	54.55[a]	50.63[b]	54.05[b]	51.79[b]	41.67[b]	44.44[b]	43.48[b]	43.50[b]
Supply background information	38.24	36.59	38.16	37.31	48.65[b]	49.32[b]	50.68[b]	49.73[b]
Make predictions	29.41	27.50	25.33	27.27	24.32	23.29	20.55	22.40
Share related experiences	14.71	18.29	21.05	20.40	32.43	25.68	36.11	31.15

[a] Top ranked pre-reading activity
[b] Second ranked pre-reading activity

These activities were: "introduce new vocabulary," "supply background information," and "provide purpose setting questions." It should be noted, however, that 90.14 percent of the below grade level teachers reported that they almost always "introduce new vocabulary" in contrast to 70.27 percent of above grade level teachers.

It is encouraging to find that 89.47 percent of primary teachers and 90.14 percent of intermediate teachers almost always introduce new vocabulary to their "below grade" reading ability groups thus appearing to give direct vocabulary instruction a high priority for below grade level students. Research has shown that below grade level readers are often required to read materials that are comparatively more difficult than the materials which at grade or above grade level readers are required to read (Gambrell, Wilson, & Gantt, 1981).

Alpert (1975), for example, found that the mean readability level of basal materials for high second-grade reading groups was below their reading ability (as measured by achievement test scores), while the mean readability level of the materials used for the low group was higher than their reading level.

Another dimension of pre-reading instruction is the amount of time teachers spend to prepare students to read a basal selection. Both primary and intermediate teachers appear to spend more time introducing a new selection to their below grade level students than they do introducing a selection to their above grade level students (see Table 7).

Table 7

Mean Number of Minutes Teachers Spend on Introducing a New Selection

Reading Ability Level	Across Grades 1-5	Primary	Intermediate
Above Grade Level	13.23	10.17	16.13
At Grade Level	15.00	12.55	17.68
Below Grade Level	16.67	15.16	18.26

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

There are three occasions during which teachers commonly provide vocabulary instruction: as an introduction to a reading (or content area) selection, after completing the reading of a selection, or as independent vocabulary instruction unrelated to a selection. To determine more specifically the role that vocabulary instruction plays in pre- and post-reading instruction, several questions in the survey specifically addressed concerns related to pre-reading vocabulary instruction.

Reasons for Teaching Vocabulary Before Students Read a Basal Selection

Teachers were asked to rate the importance of five reasons for teaching vocabulary words before they have students read a selection. The five reasons and the teachers' responses are presented in Table 8. According to the teachers surveyed, the most highly rated reason

Table 8

Importance of Reasons for Teaching Vocabulary Before A Basal Selection

	Percent Responding			
Reasons	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
So students are able to comprehend entire selection	0.0	1.3	13.6	85.1
So students know meaning of words when they read selection	0.0	3.9	17.1	78.9
So students' general vocabulary is increased	0.4	4.8	38.2	56.6
So students are able to read the selection without stumbling	3.1	11.5	33.9	51.5
So students can pronounce words	0.9	14.41	37.4	47.6

for teaching vocabulary prior to students reading a selection was "so students are better able to comprehend the entire selection" with 85.1 percent of the teachers rating this reason as very important. This was not surprising, as knowledge of word meanings is generally accepted as a critical determinant of reading comprehension, often influencing subsequent comprehension.

Pre-Reading Vocabulary Activities

Teachers participating in the survey were asked to indicate which specific activities they used to introduce vocabulary to their reading

groups before the students read a basal selection (see Table 9). In the primary grades "listing new words" was the most frequently used

Table 9

Vocabulary Activities That Teachers Report They "Almost Always" Do Before Students Read A Basal Selection

Activities	Percentage Response	
	Primary	Intermediate
Discuss in context of content material	39.90	45.66[c]
List new words	63.64[a]	63.01[a]
Define new words	39.90	40.35
Have students complete workbook page	48.21[c]	54.91[b]
Apply word identification skills	49.49[b]	38.69
Discuss words in relation to students' experience	30.81	27.33
Have students write sentences	13.64	11.56
Present new words in unrelated sentences	27.69	20.35

[a]Top ranked pre-reading activity
[b]Second ranked pre-reading activity
[c]Third ranked pre-reading activity

activity, with the second and third ranked activities being "apply word identification skills" and "have students complete workbook page" respectively. In looking at the primary reading groups by ability level the same three activities were selected as the top ranked activities with the exception of "define new words" which was the second ranked activity for below grade level students.

In intermediate grades, the most frequently selected activity was "list new words" followed by "having students complete a workbook page" and "discuss in context of content material." The same activities were identified by intermediate teachers when responses were analyzed by ability level of the reading group.

While teachers overwhelmingly responded that they taught vocabulary prior to reading a selection so that students would be better able to comprehend the selection (see Table 8), primary teachers indicated that the types of vocabulary teaching activities that they most frequently use during pre-reading instruction were skill-centered rather than meaning-centered. Intermediate teachers, on the other hand, did include contextual activities as a highly ranked activity, although this type of meaning-centered activity was still chosen less often than the skill-centered activities of "listing new words" or "having students complete a workbook page."

Vocabulary Instruction as a Post-Reading Activity

When teachers were asked if they teach vocabulary after students read a basal selection, the range of positive responses was from 52.08 percent for third-grade teachers to 82.98 percent for second-grade teachers(see Table 10). Teachers were asked to rate how frequently they use each of nine instructional vocabulary activities with students

Table 10

Percentage of Teachers Who Teach Vocabulary After A Selection

	GRADE				
Response	1	2	3	4	5
Yes	80.39	82.98	52.08	60.00	74.19
No	19.61	17.02	47.92	40.00	25.81

after they read a basal selection. The only post-reading activity that was consistently favored among teachers was "having students complete a workbook page." It was the top ranked activity in all but the above grade level groups for the intermediate students. For the intermediate above grade level groups, "having students complete a workbook page" was the second ranked activity with "discussing words in context" being the top ranked activity (see Table 11). The fact that teachers most often use written practice exercises as a follow-up to reading basal selections is not surprising as many basal programs incorporate many workbook and worksheet suggestions in their teacher's edition.

Table 11

Vocabulary Activities That Teachers Report They "Almost Always" Do After Students Read A Basal Selection

Activities	Percentage Response	
	Primary	Intermediate
Discuss in context of content material	23.18	39.00[b]
List new words	31.79[c]	22.22
Define new words	20.95	28.28
Have students complete workbook page	53.33[a]	54.90[a]
Apply word identification skills	35.57[b]	36.08[c]
Discuss words in relation to students' experience	19.59	29.41
Have students write sentences	16.44	11.65
Present new words in unrelated sentences	20.95	12.87

[a]Top ranked post-reading activity
[b]Second ranked post-reading activity
[c]Third ranked post-reading activity

USE OF TEACHER'S EDITION

The teacher's edition provided by most publishers of basal reading series not only serves the function of providing detailed and specific instructional guidance for the student materials, but for many teachers it is an "inservice course" in reading as well. Nonetheless, Durkin reported that the teacher's editions had a minor influence on pre-reading activities (Durkin, 1983). In our survey, teachers indicated how closely they adhere to recommendations in the teacher's edition by checking one of four statements about their use of the teacher's guide with each of the ability level groups that they teach. The four statements and the teacher's responses are presented in Table 12.

The responses regarding the use of the teacher's editions were very consistent between the primary and intermediate grades. The majority of both primary and intermediate grade teachers reported that they use the teacher's edition modified slightly, with only one percent of the teachers reporting that they do not use it at all. The data are also fairly consistent across ability levels at the intermediate grades; however, at the primary grades some differences by ability level can be observed (see Table 12). While across all three ability groups a large percentage of primary teachers reported that they use the teacher's edition "modified slightly," fewer teachers of the above grade level groups use the guides "as prescribed" (9.09 percent) than do teachers of the below level groups (36.11 percent).

If one assumes that teachers who choose not to use teacher's editions as prescribed are incorporating more varied teaching methods into their basal reading lessons (Stauffer, 1971), then it would appear from the findings of this survey that the above level students reap the potential benefit from more varied activities. This finding is supported by other research findings which suggest that high reading ability students receive more varied and more meaning-centered instruction, while low reading ability students receive more isolated skill-centered instruction (Allington, 1983; Alpert, 1975; Gambrell et al., 1981).

TIME SPENT TEACHING VOCABULARY OUTSIDE OF BASAL READING INSTRUCTION

Another issue pertinent to understanding the role of vocabulary instruction in the elementary school is the amount of time that teachers devote to general vocabulary development in addition to vocabulary that is taught as part of basal reading instruction. In the elementary school program, vocabulary instruction may occur as a separate subject area or as part of content area instruction, as well as being related to writing or spelling lessons. Teachers completing the survey were asked to specify the minutes per week that they devote to vocabulary instruction in each of these areas.

Time Spent Teaching Vocabulary As A Separate Subject Area

While 14 percent of the teachers (31 teachers) reported that they devoted over 45 minutes per week to general vocabulary instruction as a "separate subject," almost 52 percent of the teachers (111 teachers) reported that they spend no time on vocabulary instruction as a "separate subject" (see Table 13).

Teachers' responses did seem to indicate, however, that vocabulary development is an important part of content area instruction. Twenty-nine percent of the teachers responded that they spent over 45 minutes per week on content area vocabulary instruction. Only four percent of the teachers (eight teachers) reported that they did not spend any time on vocabulary instruction in the content areas, while 60

Table 12

Use of Teacher's Edition by Primary and Intermediate Teachers

Statement	Percent Responding by Ability Level							
	Primary				Intermediate			
	Above Grade Level	At Grade Level	Below Grade Level	Total	Above Grade Level	At Grade Level	Below Grade Level	Total
As prescribed	9.09	26.19	36.11	27.55	22.50	32.50	25.00	27.55
Modified slightly	66.67	59.52	44.44	55.10	60.00	57.50	63.16	60.20
Modified substantially	21.21	14.29	18.06	16.33	17.50	10.00	9.21	11.22
Do not use	3.03	0.00	1.39	1.02	0.00	0.00	2.63	1.02

Table 13

Percent of Teachers Who Spend Time On General Vocabulary Instruction in Addition to Reading Instruction

Minutes Per Week	Area of Instruction					
	Separate Subject			Content		
	Primary	Intermediate	Total	Primary	Intermediate	Total
0	44.79	56.78	51.40	4.12	3.68	3.65
1-15	20.83	16.10	18.22	28.17	20.67	23.74
16-30	16.67	13.56	14.95	39.58	35.65	37.90
31-45	0.00	1.70	1.00	1.04	9.57	5.94
Over 45	17.70	11.86	14.48	27.08	30.43	29.23

percent of the teachers reported spending 1-30 minutes per week on content area realted vocabulary instruction.

How Teachers Teach Vocabulary in the Content Areas

To learn more about how vocabulary is taught in the content areas, we asked teachers to indicate which activities they use to teach vocabulary in content area lessons. There was little difference between the activities that were identified by primary and intermediate teachers to teach vocabulary. In fact, the same three activities were selected as the most widely used vocabulary activities by both the primary and intermediate teachers ("discuss the words in relation to the context in which they are used," "list new words," and "define new words"). The percentage of responses for these three activities at the "almost always" response level was between 40 and 50 percent (refer to Table 14).

FACTORS THAT LIMIT TEACHING OF VOCABULARY

In order to get a more complete picture of vocabulary instruction in elementary classrooms, teachers were asked what limitations, if any, they feel affect their teaching of vocabulary. The following five factors were provided:

not enough time in school day,
unavailability of source for words,
unavailability of structured vocabulary program,
lack of vocabulary activities, and
other.

Teachers' reports about limiting factors are summarized in Table 15. Of the 228 teachers responding to the survey, 22 percent did not indicate that any factors limited their teaching of vocabulary. Of the remaining 78 percent of the teachers who checked one or more of the reasons, "not enough time in school day" was by far the most often checked factor with 64.94 percent of the primary and 63.37 percent of the intermediate teachers checking this reason.

Table 14

Activities Teachers "Almost Always" Use To Teach Vocabulary in Content Areas

Activities	Percent Responding		
	Primary (n=94)	Intermediate (n=118)	Total (n=212)
Discuss in context of content material	42.55[c]	50.42[a]	46.92[a]
List new words	47.87[a]	44.92[b]	46.21[b]
Define new words	45.16[b]	39.83[c]	42.20[b]
Have students complete workbook page	33.33	35.65	34.63
Apply word identification skills	33.68	24.14	28.45
Discuss words in relation to students' experience	22.11	23.53	22.93
Have students write sentences	8.89	16.81	13.42
Present new words in unrelated sentences	9.89	9.24	9.56

[a]Top ranked activity

[b]Second ranked activity

[c]Third ranked activity

Table 15

Factors That Teachers Report Limit Vocabulary Teaching (n=228)

Limiting Factors	Percentage of Teachers Reporting	
	Primary	Intermediate
Not enough time in school day	64.94	63.37
Unavailability of source of words	12.99	14.85
Unavailability of structured vocabulary program	25.97	33.66
Lack of vocabulary activities	24.68	36.63
Other[a]	16.88	5.94

[a]Other: "Useless activity without direct need or interest; too large of a vocabulary for some reading selections; own knowledge of word development and related skills; not enough and outdated dictionaries; the need to teach other academic priorities, i.e., study habits"

Note: 30 teachers did not indicate factors that limited their teaching of vocabulary

III. A FINAL WORD

It is apparent from the results of the survey reported here that vocabulary instruction is alive--but perhaps not completely well--among elementary school teachers as represented by the survey sample. Direct vocabulary instruction before reading a basal passage received a high priority from the teachers surveyed. It seems clear, however, that there is too much emphasis placed on listing words on the chalkboard and then using either word attack skills or context to deal with them. There is too little emphasis on meaning-based instructional activities, particularly those that relate new vocabulary to prior knowledge and experience. Furthermore, completion of workbook pages continues to be a major instructional activity at the expense of discussion and classification. In other words, we are teaching words, but we may not be teaching them in the most effective ways.

It also seems that too little vocabulary instruction is done outside of the basal reading program, considering the research showing the strong relation between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. Johnson and Pearson in Teaching Reading Vocabulary (1984) recommended that up to 20 minutes per day outside the reading period be devoted to direct vocabulary instruction; however, the results of our survey indicated that 52% of the teachers did not allocate any time to vocabulary instruction as a separate subject.

It was encouraging to note that, contrary to some research findings, low ability students in our sample are receiving at least as much as (or more) vocabulary instruction than their more capable classmates. Time spent with low ability students on vocabulary instruction is of increased importance when considered in light of Gambrell, Wilson, and Gantt's (1981) finding that "good readers" are provided "easy" reading materials in which they encounter only one unknown word out of one hundred, while "poor readers" are given "difficult" reading materials where they encounter one unknown word out of every ten consecutive words. If Gambrell et al.'s research findings reflect a common educational practice, then it is extremely important that teachers of below grade level reading ability groups give a high priority to teaching vocabulary prior to their students' reading of a passage.

We hope that the results of this survey will encourage teachers to inject more vitamins into their vocabulary instruction.

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